



**CASE STUDY: NEW JERSEY SCHOOLS FOR
SPECIAL NEEDS**

**PROVIDING EQUITABLE
SERVICES TO STUDENTS WITH
SPECIAL NEEDS**



The Gateway School

Providing Excellence in Special Education since 1981



Harbor School

Providing Excellence in Special Education Since 1969

In 2017–18, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7 million—or 14% of all public school students across the country.

In New Jersey, the overall proportion of students identified as needing special education is higher than the national average, and students from certain racial and ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately identified for special education.

For districts throughout the state, funding has not kept pace with mandated services, as the cost to provide those services is rising at a faster rate than those for the general education population.

When public schools aren't able to meet the needs of kids with special needs, parents and case managers turn to private day schools (approved by the New Jersey Department of Education) to receive equitable services for the students.

These schools are staffed with dedicated special education instruction and support services for New Jersey's most vulnerable populations.

As an alternative program to public schools, RKS Associates is a network of schools in New Jersey dedicated to providing students with special needs therapeutic and real-world experiences.

These private schools offer services to more than 50 school districts across the state to ensure students with special needs are placed in the least-restrictive learning environment.

The network includes The Gateway School of Carteret and Harbor School of Eatontown, both of which offer academic and support services for students with a variety of challenges, such

as autistic spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, multiply disabled or cognitively impaired, traumatic brain injury, or other impairments.

At The Gateway School, there are more than 50 students enrolled from 26 school districts representing five counties in central and north New Jersey. The school also has a partnership with Rutgers Behavioral Health to support students with psychiatric needs.

To be enrolled, the district sends applications based on the recommendation of the student's IEP team, which is composed of the parents/guardians, child study team members, and other professionals who have expertise relevant to the student's education plan.

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Once enrolled, students are offered a 12-month program that includes a wide range of services including speech, occupational, and physical therapy. In conjunction, music, computers, physical education, and vocational training is also part of the curriculum.

“We infuse technological support and academics across all areas of our program. From web-based instruction in all content areas, to student support through communication devices such as FM systems and iPads,” said Dana Giblin, Supervisor and Program Director for RKS Associates.

“We’re always thinking out-of-the-box to create a learning environment that provides the structure for our students to grow and progress both academically and socially.

“We’ve always tried to stay on the cutting edge when it comes to technology in our classrooms. Our philosophy as a hands-on, multisensory school is that all instruction needs a kinesthetic connection to it because students with special needs learn that way,” she said.

STEPPING UP TO THE CHALLENGE—FOCUSING ON STEM

Although technology is a big part of the school’s culture, Ms. Giblin and her team wanted to integrate more technology into curriculum that focused on science, technology, engineering, and math instruction.

However, finding teachers in these subjects who also have the knowledge and the ability to teach students with special needs is difficult, especially when classes are small and students are located in several districts across the state.

“We also have different populations from ages 5–21 at each school, and each student has a unique IEP.

“We knew it wasn’t going to be easy to find a program that could meet all of our unique needs, but we were able to check off a lot of our requirements when we were introduced to a SmartLab HQ,” she said.

The first SmartLab HQ for RKS Associates opened in 2016.

“The SmartLab Learning curriculum really allows us to do what we say we do, which is individualized and differentiated instruction,” said Ms. Giblin.

“Students prefer the SmartLab HQ over other classes. The lab is so multisensory, hands-on, and experiential that students sometimes don’t even know they’re learning. They are building things and don’t realize they’re incorporating math or problem-solving skills.

“The SmartLab HQ is a dynamic place for our students to learn. They love the way the classroom is designed, it is easy for them to follow directions, and really see the outcome of what they do.

“The room is clean and concise, and you can’t help but keep things organized. I wish all classrooms looked like that. It’s different from any other classroom in our school. And the students walk by it and look inside and say, ‘how do I get in that classroom?’ I wish I had these classes when I was a kid!”

Ms. Giblin shared that the SmartLab Learning team took the time to ensure that the room worked for the students and their unique needs.

“The SmartLab HQ allows us to serve a variety of student populations within the district. We can serve students with a class phobia at The Gateway School, and once they enter the SmartLab HQ, they don’t even realize they’re learning, but the goals and objectives of their IEPs are being met,” she said.

“It is really amazing to see how much energy and excitement these students have inside the SmartLab HQ,” she explained.

The SmartLab HQ is also getting attention from local parents who have children with special needs. “I think having a STEM lab is unique for private schools that serve students with special needs. When we show our SmartLab HQ to interested parents and students, they can’t wait to enroll,” she said.



A PERFECT ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

According to a STEM Academy report, about 35% of children with autism spectrum disorders gravitate to courses and careers involving science, technology, engineering, and math—contrast

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that with 20% of students in the general education population.

“Children with autism thrive in this environment because many of them prefer things that are specifically laid out for them,” said Ms. Giblin.

“Here, they've got the directions for designing something, or they can choose the topic and direction they want to go. The flexibility of the curriculum allows our teachers to deliver instruction in a unique way,” she said.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR RKS ASSOCIATES?

With the success of the SmartLab HQ at The Gateway School, RKS Associates funded a second SmartLab HQ for The Harbor School, which opened August 2019.

Students use the SmartLab HQ once or twice a week for 30-minutes at a time. They have access to iPads, digital cameras, computers, and kits for building and assembling various projects. They've even included a “photo booth” where students can use digital cameras to photograph a variety of objects, and iPads to create videos.

THE GATEWAY SCHOOL

- Private school located in Middlesex County in the borough of Carteret, New Jersey
- Provides academic and support services for 50 students from 26 school districts representing five counties in Central and North Jersey
- Enrolls about 50 students with special needs ages 5–21
 - 60% classified as multiply disabled or cognitively impaired
 - 30% diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders
 - 10% students with learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, mental health issues, or other health impairments

HARBOR SCHOOL

- Provides educational, vocational, and support services for about 75 students ages 3–21 with special needs in Monmouth, Middlesex, Ocean, and Mercer counties
- Students have various classifications, which include auditory impaired, autism, communication impaired, cognitively impaired, multiply disabled, traumatic brain injury, and more



Additionally, they have three computer stations for students to work collaboratively.

“We are also looking to expand again in South Jersey and hope to incorporate a new SmartLab there as well,” Ms. Giblin told.

Whether students are exploring photography, videography, computer circuitry, or music, they will be applying technology to projects of their own design; collaborating to solve problems; and building skills, knowledge, and interest that’s critical for future success.

“As they work on their projects, they will build academic connections and develop important skills that will carry them into adulthood,” Ms. Giblin continued.

“We are excited to open this new resource at The Harbor School and can’t wait to see the exciting ways students engage with the SmartLab HQ. We love seeing them buzz with energy and enthusiasm as they explore and innovate different ideas and products.

“The SmartLab HQ not only introduces students to new concepts, but our students who are higher functioning are also getting prepared to work in an actual workplace setting—that’s because all the things that they’re learning in the SmartLab HQ can apply to real-world situations.

“We have students creating their own music or learning graphic design. The students at Harbor School are engaging in more advanced science experiments, so we’re just beginning to delve into what we’re able to do in the SmartLab HQ,” she said.

